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Mental break: Work-life balance needed for recovery from job stress

MANHATTAN -- Detaching from work -- mentally, physically and electronically -- is the key to recovery from job stress during nonwork hours, according to a Kansas State University researcher.

[YoungAh Park](#), assistant professor of [psychology](#) and former businesswoman in the competitive South Korean workforce, has researched the stress crossover phenomenon between working couples, work-family boundary management and processes of work stress and recovery from stress.

She says staying connected to work through smartphones, tablets or laptops has become the norm, although being [plugged in](#) allows work-related issues to spill over to the family domain and disrupts recovery from job stress.

"Competition in the workplace is getting fierce," Park said. "People may worry about job security, want to increase their salary or advance in their career, so they feel they have to be more dedicated to their work. They show that by being available outside of normal work hours through communication and information technologies."

Checking work emails using a smartphone or tablet outside normal work hours can be beneficial for catching up with work, but it can also lead to work-related stress that spills over to the home.

"If there are any unpleasant text messages or emails from work-related people -- such as a boss, co-worker, clients, customers or contractors -- you may be more likely to ruminate about work-related issues or worries. It will affect your feelings and behaviors at home, which could further influence people at home," Park said.

According to Park, if one spouse is experiencing work stress, it can affect the other spouse. If both are stressed from work and neither is able to use the home as a place to recharge for the next day, the stress can build up at home rather than decrease.

"When people are really under stress their psychological and physical resources are drained, so they are less likely to self-regulate hostile behaviors and provide sufficient support for their spouse," Park said. "If working couples don't recuperate from their job stress while at home they would be likely to fall into a spiral of lost resources."

People who are able to unplug from work activities when off the job experience lower levels of fatigue and job burnout, Park says. They also have higher levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction than those who remain connected to work-related tasks and matters outside of normal work hours.

"If you have a strong technological boundary and self-restricted rules for using email, laptops or cellphones for work during off-work times, then you are more likely to experience psychological detachment from work," Park said.

The preference for separating work from home or family life may not be easy if a co-worker or boss do not do the same. Bringing work home or contacting work-related people outside normal work hours can affect other employees' work-home boundary management and practices, Park said.

"You tend to conform to the norm in the workplace," Park said. "If people around you at work dominantly practice integration of work into the home and family life, then you are likely to conform to the norms -- and the reverse is also true. For example, if you want to dedicate your off-work time to your family but your boss calls you about a to-do list for work over the weekend, you cannot totally ignore it and therefore, cannot fully detach yourself from work-related matters."

To create a good work-life balance, Park recommends setting self-regulated

rules for use of communication and information technologies for work during nonwork time. Also, employees may want to build others' expectations about their preferred work-home boundary and work-related communications outside of business hours.

"Let your co-workers, supervisor or any work-related people know this is how you communicate outside work," Park said. "There may be times when employees have to be involved in work during nonwork hours for urgent projects or work tasks, but it's still important that managers make sure employees have time to recover from stress after the work is done."

Moreover, a company benefits if workers return to work refreshed and de-stressed.

"Research has shown that employees who unwind from work stress during off-work times are better at showing proactive behaviors to solve problems and are more engaged in their work," Park said. "In the long term, ensuring employee recovery from job stress by detaching themselves from work is beneficial for sustaining employees' well-being and job performance capabilities."

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